

The Joy of Public Speaking

A few months ago I was asked if I wanted to give a talk (via videoconference) to a technology conference in India. Being extraordinarily bad at saying no, I said yes. I asked what they wanted me to talk about and they said I could speak about whatever I liked. I thought about it for a while and concluded that I should talk about my life and how I got out of a small town in the middle of the country and ended up working with famous people. Due to a timing screw up, I didn't get to spend as much time on it as I liked, but I did my best. I can put the draft up if anyone wants it. (Update: [Here's the talk, as prepared.](#))

(My hope was that talking about all these things would give people lots of different subjects to ask questions on, and then I could go into more detail about whatever interested people. But oddly, the questions were instead mostly about the few things I'd left out of the narrative. I wonder if that means I addressed everything in enough detail that I answered all their questions or whether I didn't talk about the things they actually cared about.)

Giving a talk via videoconference is a painful thing. First, your disembodied head is looming six feet tall over a room of people. It's hard to imagine that's attractive to anyone other than Big Brother's most ardent fan. Second, you have only the bluriest view of the audience you're speaking to. Third, you can't hear whether they're laughing or not, because if you get an audio channel then all you hear is the delayed sound of your own voice repeated back to you — which is incredibly distracting — so instead all you get is silence. It's incredibly difficult to connect with an audience under these conditions.

Still, I did my best, and I'm told it went reasonably well. I sure had fun — there's a real buzz you get from speaking before an audience, whether it's on the radio or via videocast or in person. Suddenly your depression and thirst and hunger melt away and you just light up with enthusiasm and energy. The students who filled the room I was addressing applauded and thanked me; but in truth I really owe a debt to them.

(P.S. If you did attend the talk, I'd love your honest feedback on how it went. Send me email at me@aaronsw.com or post a comment. Thanks!)

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